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Classified By: COM Michael Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

11. (C) Summary: The health of hunger-striking dissident Guillermo Farinas has taken a turn for the worse, and he is threatening to leave his hospital to "go home to die." The "Ladies in White" are to be awarded Human Rights First's annual prize. Activists reacted positively to their May 24 conference call with the Washington-based Friends of Cuban Democracy. Little activity was reported on May 20, one year after the Assembly to Promote Civil society held a major dissident gathering. This time around, Assembly leader Martha Beatriz Roque took part in a low-key event. The COM spent the day making unannounced visits to the homes of regime opponents. Three political prisoners, all among the 75 activists jailed in 2003, have ended their hunger strikes. Wives of three other incarcerated 75ers say their husbands are suffering serious health problems. Political prisoner Oscar Biscet wrote to President Bush, urging that the USG detain Fidel Castro for crimes against the American people. Another dissident showed us stitches from where he says he was clubbed by a State Security official. Heavy rains resulted in dozens of homes being destroyed, and anti-Fidel shouts were reported in at least one area of the capital. We visited a rural "transit community" after the downpour and found many Cubans living in abject poverty. End Comment.

12. (C) The health of independent journalist Guillermo Farinas, 113 days into a hunger strike for Cuba-wide Internet access, deteriorated this week. Farinas underwent two emergency operations, in which doctors removed nearly a liter of blood from his lung. He has expressed a strong desire to leave his Santa Clara hospital and "go home to die." Farinas is continuing to receive IV fluids, but his veins are said to be shutting down. We have not been able to speak with Farinas since May 19, but his mother told us May 26 that he wants to leave the hospital and return to her house "to die." Farinas' mother told us she would rather have her son seek refugee status "from a friendly country, like yours, or possibly through the ICRC." (Although Farinas has frequently talked of martyrdom, we expect him to pull back from the brink, as he has many times before.) If Farinas returns home and refuses all nourishment, he could die within days. If he loses consciousness, the authorities could send him back to the hospital, where he would again be hooked up to an IV. (Comment: The death of Farinas, a controversial but respected dissident, would likely trigger protests in various cities and, consequently, arrests. End Comment.)

ANOTHER AWARD FOR "LADIES IN WHITE"

13. (SBU) The "Ladies in White," relatives of political prisoners, have been informed by the US-based NGO Human Rights First that they will receive the group's annual human rights prize. The prize, awarded in past years to Corazon Aquino and Mary Robinson, will be presented October 16 in New York City at a ceremony that is to draw "more than 800 lawyers, politicians and prominent business leaders from New York and Washington." Leading Lady Laura Pollan said representatives of her group would be delighted to attend, but realize that the GOC might block their departure. Such was the case last year, when the Ladies sought exit permission to claim the European Parliament's Sakharov prize.

CONFERENCE CALL BRINGS HOPE

14. (C) Cuban activists are responding positively to May 24's conference call connecting USINT with Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart's office, in which the following people participated: Martha Beatriz Roque and Nestor Rodriguez Lobaina; various "Friends of Cuban Democracy" in Washington, including the Ambassadors (or DCMs) of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia; Representatives Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart and staff; other USG officials; various leaders of Miami's Cuban community, including Angel de Fana, Sylvia Iriondo, Orlando Guttierrez and Frank Calzon; and USINT staff, led by COM. News of the event thrilled several Ladies in White, and Roque and Lobaina were particularly energized. During the conference call, the Europeans expressed solidarity with the dissidents and asserted that it is only a matter of time before democracy reaches Cuba. The dissidents appealed, above all, for the immediate liberation of all political prisoners. The Slovak Ambassador said his Embassy in Havana would offer free Internet service to dissidents "within weeks."

MAY 20 PASSES QUIETLY

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15. (C) Cuba's former Independence Day, Saturday, May 20, passed with little fanfare, a year after a large group of pro-democracy activists held an unprecedented gathering in the backyard of 75er Felix Bonne. This year, an act of repudiation was held at the site of last year's event, and across town, four Assembly officials met briefly at a prison cell that once held Jose Marti. One of the four, Miguel Valdez Tamayo, spent the previous night at a nearby park to avoid detention. COM and Poloff spent the day making unannounced visits to dissidents' homes, including those of freed 75ers Oscar Espinosa Chepe, Roberto de Miranda, and Jorge Olivera; Lady in White Laura Pollan; Ana Aguililla (wife of political prisoner Francisco Chaviano); Elsa Morejon (wife of political prisoner Oscar Biscet); and Beatriz del Carmen Pedroza (wife of political prisoner Julio Cesar Galvez). During the stop at De Miranda's home, the COM met with a half-dozen academics taking part in an event to mark the day.

POLITICAL PRISONERS END PROTESTS

16. (C) Three political prisoners who are members of Oswaldo Paya's Christian Liberation Movement called off their hunger strikes. Luis Enrique Ferrer Garcia, the 75er who received the longest sentence of all (28 years), discontinued his action along with Alexis Rodriguez Fernandez and Agustin Cervantes Garcia. They were protesting their unjust incarcerations and poor prison conditions. On May 25, we met with wives of three other imprisoned 75ers -- Omar Ruiz, Arturo Perez and Lester Gonzalez -- all suffering major health problems. Perez alone has spina bifida, gastritis, emphysema and prostate issues, as well as cellmate problems. Another political prisoner, Oscar Biscet, managed to send us,

through a note inside a book's hard cover, a letter to President Bush. In the letter, dated January 6, Dr. Biscet says the human rights situation in Cuba requires "preventive action." He also proposes that the USG take Fidel Castro into custody for crimes against the American people, and says that if Cubans were to rebel against Castro, they would be massacred "like those at Tiananmen Square."

DISSIDENT BEATEN IN STREET

17. (C) Dissident Jesus Verdecia Castillo of the Pro-Human Rights Party met with us May 23 and showed us stitches on his head from what he says was an unfavorable May 16 encounter with a State Security agent. Verdecia was summoned to a State Security office in Santa Clara and after that meeting, a State Security officer allegedly followed him and attacked him with a stick. Witnesses were allegedly present but unwilling to get involved. When Verdecia went to a hospital for treatment, he said, two other dissidents happened to be there, and the GOC responded by sending 20 policemen to the scene, plus State Security officials. Verdecia ended up spending the next 12 hours in custody before being released without charge.

HEAVY RAINS ADD TO MISERY

18. (SBU) Heavy downpours May 22 and 23 resulted in dozens of Havana homes being destroyed. In the hard-hit inland neighborhood of Santo Suarez, anti-Fidel shouts were reported. Home video of the scene, shared with USINT, did not contain audio of any such shouts, but showed considerable destruction caused by floodwaters six feet deep. On May 24, we visited a "transit community," an official housing complex for those who have lost their homes, on the outer fringes of Havana. We found widespread poverty among the estimated 700 residents at the site, one of three in Havana's San Miguel del Padron municipality.

COMMENT

19. (C) The deterioration of Farinas' health has received considerable attention both domestically and abroad. His death would not only cost Cuba's human rights community one of its most dedicated members but could trigger street protests. It has been many years since a dissident has died under these kinds of circumstances. On a brighter note, we see nothing but an upside to the Ladies' latest honor, and we believe that the Friends of Cuban Democracy event could generate momentum, particularly among some of our European friends, toward holding the Castro regime accountable for

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ongoing rights violations.
PARMLY